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### Successes and Setbacks in Academic Labor Struggle

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## No 12 (2005)

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Special Issue edited by Julie Schmid

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Wagner, V. (2005). Review of *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives*. *Workplace*, 12, 115- 117.

VIVIAN WAGNER

**REVIEW OF *DISCIPLINED MINDS: A CRITICAL LOOK AT SALARIED PROFESSIONALS AND THE SOUL-BATTERING SYSTEM THAT SHAPES THEIR LIVES***

by Jeff Schmidt

True to its subtitle, Jeff Schmidt's *Disciplined Minds* is a critical look at salaried professionals. At its best moments, it's also insightful and smart, and it contributes to a long tradition of institutional criticism. If you're a salaried professional, this book can help you to understand and interpret the institutional forces that have shaped everything from what you studied in college to what job you're doing now, and everything in between—including how you feel, which, if Schmidt's right, entails being duped by the system, lost, confused, and perhaps downright depressed. Sound familiar? Then you'll want to take a look at this book. If not, you must be one of the lucky few who have, somehow, learned to survive and even thrive in the cold, hard world of professional life. I must admit, strange as it may seem, that I find myself, and many of my colleagues and friends, in this latter category, but more on that later. Let's look, first, at the professional panopticon that is Schmidt's world. Then we'll talk survival.

Schmidt's basic premise is that from graduate school onward we professionals are taught not to think for ourselves, that we are not free—in any sense of the word—and that we go through a long process by which we give up independent and creative thinking in favor of bureaucratic groupthink. Worse yet, we do it willingly and largely unknowingly: we jump through the numerous hoops presented to us in college, graduate school, and professional employment; submit to the hierarchical pecking order of research institutions and corporations; and put our early creativity, hopes, dreams, and goals aside in order to fulfill the goals of institutions—both those that educate and those that eventually employ us. In the process, we become, like the prisoner's in Foucault's panopticon, self-policing: we lose all ability, and even all desire, to escape. Not only do we relinquish control over our professional and creative lives, in other words, but we relinquish that control *to ourselves*. We become, according to Schmidt, our own worst enemies.

It is, as you can imagine, a grim scene. From grade school through college and professional school, and eventually with employment, we lose, says Schmidt, our sense of power, resistance, and creative thought. And, ultimately, democracy suffers. As he asserts, "A system that turns potentially independent thinkers into politically subordinate clones is as bad for society as it is for the stunted individuals. It bolsters the power of the corporations and other hierarchical organizations, undermining democracy" (4). Heady stuff, this. Schmidt demonstrates that, in a variety of fields—from medicine to physics to the humanities—those who would be independent thinkers become instead clones—and with astonishing

rapidity and preciseness. But while I understand with every fiber of my being what he's talking about—I, too, have jumped through the hoops of graduate school; and I, too, have seen firsthand the daily assault on creativity that takes place in a variety of professional spheres—the all-encompassing nature of his argument gives me pause.

Don't get me wrong: I don't disagree with this basic premise. How could I? It's demonstrably true: we all—professionals and nonprofessionals alike—can recognize this process and see it at work in our daily lives. And, certainly, all bureaucracies, both academic and corporate, have battered their fair share of souls. All of that's true, and Schmidt cogently analyzes the process, drawing on his own experience both as a physics graduate student and as an editor for *Physics Today* (from which, ultimately, he was fired—in part, according to his introduction, for writing this book on company time). His argument is sound, well-researched, even airtight—though it's at this point that I begin to have problems with it. For Schmidt, I feel, makes *too* airtight a case. Throughout much of his book, I found myself wanting to hear about some exceptions. To have some recognition of creativity that survives despite all odds. Some awareness that things aren't hopeless, completely. That we really don't live—not entirely! not yet!—in a panopticon. That despite the constraints on their time, energy, and minds, both professionals and nonprofessionals manage every day to think creatively, engage in activism, critique their institutions and politicians, write letters to the editor, vote, and just plain old talk around the water cooler. That, basically, no one's mind is quite as *disciplined* as the title and the first two-thirds of the book suggest.

It isn't until the last section of the book—and my favorite—that Schmidt begins to do what I wanted him to do all along: grant that there's some wiggle room here. In this section, titled “Part Three: Resistance,” Schmidt looks at how professionals can resist the tyranny of professional life and recover a sense of creativity and autonomy. To do this, he draws on texts as various as Robert Jay Lifton's study of brainwashing, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Tradition*, and a U.S. Army field manual designed to help POWs maintain their sanity while in the enemy's captivity. This section is ingenious for appropriating these texts—originally intended for much different audiences!—to serve the goal of teaching professionals how to survive in their daily lives. And the tips, particularly those from the Army field manual, are useful: understand your captor's psychology and techniques, prepare to take action, work with other prisoners in a team effort, and ultimately resist subordination. Schmidt gives these practical guidelines, he says, to graduate students and professionals so that such individuals may survive and maintain a sense of autonomy despite all of the forces working against them. And for this, he must be commended.

Early in his book, after all, Schmidt says that his ultimate goal is to give professionals a sense of empowerment and liberation via his assessment and reevaluation of professional life. As he says, such reassessment “can help you recover your long-forgotten social goals and begin to pursue them immediately, giving your life greater meaning and eliminating a major source of stress” (5). And, in a further twist (institutions and management, take heed), such reassessment can also make one a better worker: “It can help you become a savvy player in the workplace and reclaim some lost autonomy. And, ironically, it can help you command greater respect from management and receive greater recognition and reward, without necessarily working harder” (5). The last section of the book lays the groundwork for doing this, and provides helpful hints on how to survive as a professional. Thus, though much of the book paints a gloomy scenario of professional drones being destroyed by the world of education and work, the last section offers some hope that this process need not be inevitable.

I would say, however, that it never was, and never has been, inevitable. There have always been professionals who love what they do, critique tyranny, and strenuously resist attempts by faceless institutions to batter their souls. Resistance, in other words, is really not something that Schmidt needs to teach us: though I sympathize with the impulse behind his book, and behind the practical advice he gives in the last section, I think it would be just as—if not more—valuable to recognize the forms of resistance, survival, and creativity that are already out there. There are doctors who do life-saving research, give

their time to clinics in poor neighborhoods, and/or fight the tyranny of managed care. There are scientists designing fuel-saving cars, solar panels, and new uses for soybeans. There are lawyers working to help union drives. There are even English professors taking time away from writing about gender in nineteenth-century novels (itself, I'd like to think, a worthy task) to read to children in local elementary schools. Maybe I'm too much of an optimist, but I see astoundingly adaptable resistance all around me. Schmidt chooses to paint a totalitarian picture of what it means to be a professional, but it might be more useful, less grim, and in the end closer to the truth to focus on the slips, the exceptions, the times when—at least for a brief moment—we remember why we do what we do, and how we might yet do it better.